

# Florida Panther

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

photo: Larry Richardson



photo: USFWS



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### Refuge Facts

- Established: June 1989.
- Acres: 26,400 located in Collier County, FL.
- Location: The refuge is located 20 miles east of Naples, north of Interstate 75 and west of SR 29. The refuge headquarters is in east Naples at Exit 15 of Interstate 75, inside the Comfort Inn Motel.
- Administers Ten Thousand Island NWR as part of complex.

### Natural History

- Refuge is situated in the upper segment of the Fakahatchee Strand of the Big Cypress Swamp.
- Endangered Florida panthers den, hunt, and travel over refuge; 5 to 11 panthers use refuge over a given month.
- Concentrations of water birds, wading birds including wood storks (several rookeries).
- Concentrations of rare tropical orchids.
- Refuge contains 15,000 acres woodland, 11,400 acres of mixed swamp and prairie.

### Financial impact of Refuge

- 11-person staff.
- Refuge closed to general public use, though limited tours account for 300 annual visits.
- Current budget (FY 98) \$879,000.

### Refuge Objectives

- Provide optimum habitat conditions for Florida panther and endangered species.
- Restore and conserve natural diversity and ecological function of refuge fauna and flora.
- Implement environmental education promoting Florida panther and south Florida ecosystem.

- Promote cooperative management of natural resources within the Big Cypress Watershed.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for compatible public use.

### Management Tools

- Prescribed fire.
- Exotic plant control through mechanical and chemical means.
- Education/interpretation.
- Law enforcement.
- Partnerships.

### Public Use Opportunities

- Interpretive trail.
- Limited refuge tours.

### Calendar of Events

**January:** cooperative panther captures.

**May:** Migratory Bird Day.

**October:** National Wildlife Refuge Week.

### Questions and Answers

*How many panthers use the refuge?*  
On a monthly timeframe, 5 to 11 panthers use a portion of the refuge for hunting, traveling to other areas, loafing, or denning.

*Why is the refuge closed to the public?*

Because the Florida panther population is so low and critically endangered, disturbance such as public use is kept to a minimum.

*Where can I see a panther in the wild?*

The Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve immediately south of the refuge has a primitive road, Jane's Scenic Drive, that traverses through panther habitat. While panthers are very secretive and chances are slim to actually see one, you may get lucky either driving this road or walking an old logging road off of Jane's Scenic Drive.

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### *Why do we burn the refuge?*

The refuge staff with other professionals apply prescribed fire to various habitats to accomplish a variety of objectives. Fire is an inexpensive and efficient tool that has been used for thousands of years to clear the undergrowth and revitalize the understory species. Fire on the refuge is used to maintain native plant communities and improve wildlife habitat especially that for panthers. Also, we employ prescribed fire successfully to reduce the natural fuel loads where we can reduce the risk of severe damage to woodlands that could otherwise occur with a rampant wildfire. In other words, fire danger to habitat and to our neighbors' property is lowered through the careful application of fire.

### *How do we keep up with or study the panthers?*

Our biologists, along with state biologists, follow previously captured panthers through use of radiotelemetry. This technique involves receiving a radio signal from a cat which has a radio transmitter attached to its neck. Following these signals enables a biologist to: locate the panther in its habitat, determine where and when panthers may come in contact for breeding, locate den sites, determine travel patterns, and learn about when a panther dies. Our staff may on occasion interpret panther tracks left in trackable areas on the refuge.